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A Grave Matter

02.12.2009 | Faculty

A UD faculty member says Roman slaves may have had more status at the start of the Roman Imperial period than conventional wisdom suggests.

Columbarium tombs — burial chambers beneath the city — give some evidence that slaves could not only acquire limited material worth, but also assemble, form paid associations and have status as individuals and families, said assistant professor Dorian Borbonus, who joined the UD faculty full time in the fall after two years as a lecturer.

The use of columbaria — cavernous cellars with rows upon rows of shoebox-sized niches carved into walls — was more of a trend than a custom, historically speaking, as the practice lasted only two generations at the dawn imperial Rome between 20 B.C. and A.D. 30.

"It appears they were administered by associations, resembling clubs, that the slaves were allowed to affiliate with legally," Borbonus said. "They were to commemorate the people who are buried, but they are not tombs for followers of a certain religion."

In each niche would be placed an urn with the ashes of the deceased, and in the wall or on a plate above the niche, a name would be engraved or painted, sometimes with the letters D and M, an abbreviation of the Latin phrase *dis manibus*, loosely translated "to the spirit of the deceased," or "to the memory of the spirit."

The prevailing opinion is that the columbaria were borne strictly of real estate economy: Lots of remains in the smallest possible space. It's a fair assumption based on the evidence available — basically only the tombs and the inscriptions, Borbonus said. Equally fair, however, is his contention that the columbaria had a more sociocultural origin — an elevation of social position and perhaps as a sign of alliance with the emperor, he said.

"My feeling after having researched this is that there was solidarity in the burial community," he said. "Social groups formed, and they were able to claim a sort of status. Roman society changed a lot with the transition from the republic to the empire."

The philosopher Seneca's writings provide some credence. Though Seneca came decades after the first columbaria were used, his advocacy for the humane treatment of slaves — indeed, even saying they should be treated as individuals and seen as equals — reflected a value of the Stoic philosophy that had been gaining acceptance for the previous 200 years.

It's disappointing, however, that there's no proof.

"Either hypothesis can only be supported by suggestive evidence," he said.

As for why the use of columbaria ceased for the deceased, Borbonus can only speculate: "Maybe they were elevated into mainstream society."

Borbonus attended the Archaeological Institute of America's annual meetings in December, and in April, he'll present "Non-elite Funerary Commemoration in Rome" at the Theoretical Roman Archaeological Conference in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Borbonus is a native of Essen, Germany, and earned his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania.

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